



Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council

ISSUE BRIEF: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

“More young Americans can name an American Idol winner and the city where the cartoon Simpsons live than know the political party of their state’s governor.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Recent evidence suggests that American youth are disengaged and lack the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to participate in and carry out civic duties. Examples of this trend include:

- 49% of youth today say voting is not important, and voter turn-out rates among 18-24 year-olds have dropped by one third since 1972.²
- One third of high school seniors lack a basic understanding of the principles of our government and how our democracy works.³
- Only 26% of U.S. students have proficient skills, knowledge and dispositions for democratic participation.⁴

In Maine, the evidence is consistent. Less than 30% of students meet State standard score levels in social studies and 67% believe social studies will not be useful to them in their future work.⁵ Maine students responded correctly to only 50% of the assessment test questions related to Civics.

Many fear that the civic mission of public schools has been neglected in light of ever-changing educational standards that emphasize other subjects.⁶ Some think that the structure and culture of most schools do not permit student participation in school governance and decision making. Others believe there aren’t enough opportunities available for students to have meaningful, authentic experiences to participate in their communities.⁷ Though the cause of this problem may be multifaceted, the cause for concern is not. How will today’s disengaged youth lead America through the next generation of challenges without knowledge of – and interest in – citizenship?

CURRENT APPROACHES

A variety of local and state-wide approaches to address this issue are making headway in Maine, including the following initiatives.

- **Maine Citizenship Education Task Force** – A coalition of individuals and organizations committed to promoting and strengthening citizenship education across Maine schools, communities and colleges.
- **Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council** – A 20-member (16 youth, 4 legislators) council that advises the Legislature on proposed legislation, state budget initiatives and policies that affect youth.
- **Lewiston Youth Advisory Council** - An advisory council to the Lewiston City Council that enables youth to work towards goals that empower all the community’s youth and to undertake service projects that enhance the community.
- **Project Citizen** – A curricular program in which students work cooperatively to identify a public policy problem in their community, develop a solution, and implement an action plan.
- **First Amendment Schools** – A national initiative designed to transform how schools teach and practice the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that frame civic life in our democracy.
- **Civil Rights Teams** – A co-curricular program involving students, faculty and community members who work together towards making positive changes in a school’s social climate.

Students involved in these and other civic education programs across the state have accomplished noteworthy successes that highlight the potential of a reinvigorated youth citizenry. Youth members serving on the **Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council** advised Legislators on tough issues including education, youth employment, youth in foster care, and substance abuse. Members of the **Lewiston Youth Advisory Council** have conducted a noise pollution awareness campaign, partnered with the city fire department to encourage business and homeowners to follow emergency response guidelines and raised money to create electronic, community message boards. Through **Project Citizen**, Cumberland students created a pay-per-bag waste policy to increase recycling, Portland students testified before the Legislature's Education Committee in support of a proposal to increase funding to pay for laptops, and Holden students developed a policy that requires defibrillators in public buildings. Kennebunk students fulfill **First Amendment School** practices and principles through active participation on the school board and hiring committees, by developing policies to encourage students to take standardized tests more seriously, and by implementing revisions to the student government structure. The Ellsworth's **Civil Rights Team** participated in the 2006 Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week by partnering with community-based and school-based domestic violence and sexual assault educators.

POLICY QUESTIONS

Building on the initiatives described above and their role in enhancing civic engagement of Maine's youth, consider the following policy questions:

- Definitions – What is civic engagement? A behavior? An attitude? An understanding? Knowledge? A set of skills? Where does it occur?
- Accountability – Who should be accountable for enhancing and maintaining civic education in Maine schools and colleges? Students? Teachers? Schools? Colleges? Communities? States? Feds?
- Costs and Benefits – What are the costs and benefits of increasing youth engagement in civic education activities? Do the benefits outweigh the costs or vice versa?
- Standards – What role(s) can Maine's existing learning standards (Maine Learning Results) play in enhancing and maintaining civic education in Maine schools?
- Assessment – Can civic engagement be measured? If so, how?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Maine Citizenship Task Force

www.maine.gov/education/mecitizenship/about/index.html

Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council

<http://www.maine.gov/legis/opla/legyouth.htm>

Final Report (2004) of the Commission to Study the Scope and Quality of Citizenship Education

<http://www.maine.gov/legis/opla/citedrpt.PDF>

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

<http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/site/resources/index.html>

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education

http://www.civicyouth.org/practitioners/practitioners_outside27.htm

¹ Kurtz, K.T., A. Rosenthal & C. Zukin. *Citizenship: A Challenge for All Generations*. Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2003.

² The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) 2002.

³ National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Data, 1998.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Maine Educational Assessment Data, 2002-2003.

⁶ Smith, Stacy. Are Public Schools Leaving Citizenship Behind? *Journal of Maine Education*, Winter 2005.

⁷ Final Report of the Commission to Study the Scope and Quality of Citizenship Education, 2004